

The Museum of Modern Art

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TWO NEW INSTALLATIONS BY ASIAN WOMEN ARTISTS TO BE PREMIERED IN THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART'S *PROJECTS* SERIES

Projects: Bul Lee/Chie Matsui
January 23–March 25, 1997

Two installations, by Korean artist Bul Lee (b. 1964) and Japanese artist Chie Matsui (b. 1960), will be paired in the *Projects* gallery at The Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition opening January 23, 1997. For the purposes of this exhibition, on view through March 25, the gallery will be divided into two separate rooms, one for each artist. Lee and Matsui explore and exploit cultural conventions, particularly those relating to the ideals of womanhood, using a medium that has recently emerged as a major avant-garde movement in Korea and Japan. For this exhibition, they have created vibrant, risky works made up of a wide variety of unusual materials to explore and comment on contemporary Asian society, in which traditional values are continually adjusting to the increasing effects of modernization.

“Though hardly new in Japan and Korea—its roots reach back to the interdisciplinary events of the 1960s—the all-embracing nature of installation encourages the extravagant gesture that characterizes an avant-garde,” says Barbara London, Associate Curator, Department of Film and Video, who organized the exhibition. “In this exhibition viewers will feel they have entered a pair of Gothic fairy tales where the glamorous and the humdrum are strangely linked.”

Bul Lee was raised by parents who were political dissidents and lived her childhood in Korea as a fugitive. She studied sculpture in art school in Seoul, where her early works

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consisted of sewn sculptures of body parts, mostly gigantic buttocks, breasts, and vaginas. Some of these pieces stood alone as objects; others she appliquéd and wore. Five years ago, Lee began applying sequins to the scales of fresh fish and sealing them individually in plastic bags. These she pinned to gallery walls, where they soon developed an unmistakable odor. The message was clear: beauty is fleeting, especially for ornamented women.

In deference to Western olfactory sensitivities, the fish in the *Projects* installation, *Majestic Splendor (Hwa Um)* (1997), have been sanitized, contained in bags that include a chemical deodorizer. (As an added satiric touch, Lee has perfumed the entire installation with a spicy fragrance redolent of a romanticized Orient.) Other fish are refrigerated in a large glass case, where they are entangled in a gold net that also holds hair ornaments and shiny black tresses, evocative of Asian beauty. Crowning this display is a lavish wreath of white lilies, alluding to female purity. The title of the piece is drawn from one of the major Buddhist sutras, which describes the state of spiritual enlightenment attained through sacrifice for others.

Chie Matsui grew up in the industrial city of Osaka and studied textile design in Kyoto. In her first exhibitions, a series of architectural pieces, Matsui guided viewers along narrow corridors, up and down stairs, and onto cramped viewing platforms. The confined areas epitomized space as people experience it in Japan. The focal point of these works was a view of an abstract landscape seen through a small hexagonal cutout in a wall.

With the deaths of her parents and grandmother, Matsui lost the authoritative influence of her immediate family. She stopped building reserved structures, and turned her gaze inward. Her new works explore interiors, which she presents as live-in spaces with numerous domestic allusions. These rooms are aggressive, filled with

outrageous and grotesque elements that express the artist's disaffection with a convention-bound society. Matsui's recent series of installations, *Labor*, features the *sanmenkyo*, the traditional three-part folding mirror commonly found on a woman's vanity table. The mirror is an interface between a woman's private persona and the restrained face she carefully arranges for public appearance.

In *Labor 39* (1997), the piece that appears in the *Projects* exhibition, these mirrors have metamorphosed, becoming shattered fragments embedded in a circular saw blade twenty-four inches across. Once a symbol of peaceful, reflective moments, the *sanmenkyo* has become a troubling and threatening instrument. The walls of the installation are layered with masses of fake fur stained a tawdry lipstick red, suggesting both bloodshed and lurid sexuality. The installation reads like a panel in a *manga*, a kind of serialized pulp fiction comic book. Widely read in Japan, the weekly installments feature the mutilation of young women and "salary men." The work stands as a challenge to the myth of familial and social harmony that Japan presents to itself and to the outside world.

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